Missoula City Council Public Works Committee Minutes

June 10, 2026, 2:55 pm
Council Chambers (in person) or TEAMS (virtually)
Attend in person: City Council Chambers, 140 W Pine, Missoula MT

Members present: **Mirtha Becerra, Bob Campbell, Betsy Craske, Gwen Jones, Kristen Jordan, Sean McCoy, Eric Melson, Mike Nugent, Justin Ponton, Jennifer Savage, Amber Sherrill**

Members absent: **Stacie Anderson**

1. ADMINISTRATIVE BUSINESS

1.1 Roll Call

1.2 Approval of the Minutes

1.2.1 Minutes from May 20, 2026

The minutes were approved as submitted.

2. PUBLIC COMMENT

3. COMMITTEE BUSINESS

3.1 Resolution Supporting Advancement into the Final Design and Implementation of the Downtown Safety Access and Mobility (SAM) Project

Megan McMeekin presenting,

This project is actually four projects combined into one called the Downtown Safety, Access, and Mobility Project. The four projects include the Higgins Ave multimodal improvements, stretching from Brooks to Broadway; the Front and Main two-way conversion; Riverfront Trail and Connectivity Improvements; and Signal Optimization of 23 signals.

This project will correct many of the challenges that no longer meet the needs of a growing community. The current downtown network has inefficient circulation, disconnected bike lanes, and slopes at intersections that pose challenges for ADA users. The signals are not efficiently coordinated, causing many delays.

The Riverfront Trail is one of the most popular destinations for residents and visitors of all abilities. It is also outdated, too narrow for increased usage, and has trip hazards throughout, and it is not ADA compliant.

The City of Missoula has submitted an application for a Federal RAISE Grant, which was approved with several criteria specified. The scope cannot be broken out due to the grant funding requirements.

The project has two technical working groups that provide technical feedback on the design standards. The two groups are the Citizen Working Group, comprising 18 community members, and the Project Management Team, responsible for delivering the project.

At this time, the base project has to be finalized. The project is now 4 to 9 million over budget, but costs have not been finalized and will not be known till all the bids are received.

The attached presentation goes into more detail on the base plan and other considerations. Also, the video attached here goes into more detail on the presentation.

Mr Nugent mentioned that this proposal was submitted years ago and that costs have risen since then. He referenced the overage amount and how much we can change in the project due to the scope. What can be done if the city is unable to raise the additional funds? Mr. Keene said we do have to come up with the money, and if we did not have the TIF money, we would have to look at other funding sources, such as the gas tax and the road district. Or we would have to return the money.

Mr. Nugent asked if we could save money by changing the bike lane layout. Mr. Keene said the Grant was very specific in certain aspects, and we cannot change those. The grant said the bike lanes needed to be protected, so changing this would not meet the grant requirements.

Ms. Jones asked if someone could explain the expertise of traffic engineers working on this. Mr. Keene replied that we have hired traffic engineers and consultants to ensure this is done right. Donney Pfeifer from DJ&A spoke, and he is a traffic engineer. He also said they are consulting with Kettleson Associates, which has a national footprint. They are both looking at NACTO and following national guidelines. Ms. Jones just wanted to have some discussion on record that it has been studied by experts.

Mr. Ponton asked about traffic congestion in front of the parking structures. Mr. Keene said they feel this project will help get people to the parking structures. He did say, however, on big events you will probably see some congestion, but in general it should help the flow.

Mr. Ponton asked what the striping structure would look like across the Beartrax bridge. Mr. Keene said that it would be like a three-lane street with a turn lane in the middle, but that would be hashed out. With the extra space on the bridge, some on-street bike lanes will be added, and that will help take some traffic off the walkway. This will give the bicyclists who want to go faster an option to remain on the street. If they want to stay slower or feel more comfortable with kids, they can stay on the path.

Mr. Campbell asked if all the base projects would be covered in the budget. Mr. Keene said that he feels we are about 4 million dollars short of the base project plan due to increased costs over the past few years.

Mr. Campbell also asked about congestion and the ability of delivery vehicles to find parking when delivering to businesses. Ms. McMeekin said they actually have a delivery driver on the working group, and he has been very helpful when finding locations for truck parking. Mr. Pfeifer replied they are working to design large enough to accommodate the larger vehicles. They have standard designs that will model these large vehicles. He also

said they will include loading and unloading zones, with input from drivers and the parking commission on their locations.

Mr. Campbell asked if his travel time will take longer when this is done. Mr. Pfeifer said they conducted extensive modeling to see how the signals would interact with each other. He said it is hard to determine for sure, but they are working to try to make it as efficient as possible.

Mr. Nugent asked if vehicles are turning right off Higgins onto Broadway, will this better serve the vehicles? Mr. Pfiefer said the signal upgrades will allow additional safety measures to prevent conflicts with pedestrians and bicycles, but he can't say whether queue time or efficiency would be lower. Megan McMeekin also added the equipment will make that intersection much safer, and this is the priority. Mr. Nugent said that cars seem to be the only ones who are held accountable for not following the signals. He added that nothing he has heard will make that intersection any safer. Mr. Pfeifer said the bike-and-walk will have more specific clarification on when they can go with the signals. It will also be clearer to the driver. Mr. Nugent added that he feels we are not taking into account the vehicle traffic and looking more at pedestrian traffic. He said it seems like it will let pedestrians go, and the cars will have to wait. Mr. Keene said the main focus is separation and clarity for each user.

Mr. Nugent asked how long Higgins would be closed during construction. Ms. McMeekin said it will be open the entire time.

Ms. Sherrill said we are always going across bridges, and she asked whether we are trying to get people not to go through downtown to reach a different area if they are just passing through. Mr. Keene said it is not what they hope will happen, but it is what is currently happening. He said studies show most people do not go through downtown if they are just passing through. Most people coming downtown currently are actually coming downtown. He did add he thinks we will have some traffic distribution, and they are still trying to figure out what that might be.

Mr. Melson asked how the reimbursement for the grant has been going so far. Ms. McMeekin said they are submitting every other month, and all project costs have been reimbursed to date.

Mr. Melson asked whether any of the alternatives were cost-savers, and Mr. Keene replied that they were, as they can substitute materials.

Mr. Melson also asked about the street lighting on Front and Main and whether we had any options to have it included. Mr. Keene said that they are looking to MRA to be a likely funding source. Ms. Buchannon said that MRA has the capacity to pay for this, and she feels this is our opportunity to disrupt downtown once, and we should do it right the first time. This will not take away from any other projects MRA is currently working on. She feels the street lighting on Front and Main is an important aspect of this project.

Mr. Ponton asked who had been contacted at the business. Ms. McMeekin said she has gone around with several people to talk with business owners and is also involved with the downtown business district.

Mr. McCoy asked about parking in the bike lane and said it makes him a little worried. Can this be changed around? Mr. Keene said this was a project they had difficulty with.

They want the protected bike lane area, and we just didn't have the space or money to do this. It would cut into the sidewalks and the area in front of the businesses, and cutting into the infrastructure was increasing costs.

Mr. McCoy added that he was wondering whether the signal could stop pedestrian traffic. Mr. Pfeifer said we can change this around if it is not working. It is not absolute, nor is it hard to make the changes.

Mr. McCoy also asked about the delivery vehicles and said he believed most of this was done in the alley. He wanted to know if there was data on how much was delivered into the alley vs the street. Mr. Keene said that alley delivery would be ideal, but some areas lack alleys.

Mr. Campbell asked whether we were now on the hook to cover the 4 million shortfall. Me. Keene said that we can choose not to do the project if we can't cover the budget shortfall.

Ms. Becerra said that this project is not just about parking but about mobility as a whole. She asked about whether Mountain Line was on board with this project as well. Mr. Pfeifer said that Mountain Line is a partner, working to enhance stops and make it easier for people to access the bus, and that they have been a great partner.

Ms. Becerra asked how much parking was being lost and what the parking availability would be. Ms. Pilgram with the parking commission responded they would like to shift parking off the street and into the structures for longer stays. This way, street parking would be available for short-term use. The structures are not in use, and on-street parking is the primary use. We have 259 spaces available to the public in the parking structures. This project will eliminate 104 spaces, which is about 4 percent of downtown parking.

Ms. Becerra asked how people would know if we have open parking spaces. Ms. Pilgram said they are always thinking about how to let people know about this, and they are working to change this inside of the garages. They are planning to remove the gates and install a camera system that displays a note indicating how many open spaces are currently available in the garage.

Mr. Nelson asked whether we were missing an opportunity to address some surface issues, such as paving and stormwater. Mr. Keene said they are not doing a lot with stormwater, but they are trying to do what they can. He said we can't add in too much more.

Public Comment:

Karen Sippy, a downtown business owner and member of the citizen working group. She said all of these issues they are bringing up have been discussed in the working group for hours. This project is going to do what it is supposed to do. It will improve mobility and ensure consistent traffic flow. She said the number of trees to be planted is very low. The parks will be more accessible to ADA access. The front and main conversions will help with access to our parking garages. Parking has been discussed a lot, and it is being addressed.

Abby Huseth, Director of Climate Smart Missoula. She is excited to see this project get to this point, and she feels it will be transformational for our downtown. This project will be a

showcase for what Missoula is all about. She is confident this will be a massive improvement for our community.

Patrick Montgomery said that this is such a big project and what happens if people get out of the habit of going downtown. His circles are talking about not going downtown, and he feels this may affect Missoula businesses. He says he hopes he is wrong, but he feels this is something we need to consider.

Danielle Petri commented that some of these staff members are turning into politicians. She said she would answer the questions as a citizen, not a politician. Council member Jones asked about the engineering experts, and Kettelson recommended not cutting down on parking, but we are not listening to them. Council member Campbell asked how much longer it would take for him to get to work, and Kettelson reported it would be one to two minutes longer. Councilman Nugent asked about the Broadway Intersection, and the same traffic pattern will be in effect at other intersections. Mr. Ponton asked about visibility and reduced crashes for the separated bike lanes, and the findings indicate fewer crashes where the bike lanes are separated, but more at intersections. She looked for the wording in the grant that said we had to have separate bike lanes but was not able to find it; she only found where we had to improve bike lanes. Ms. Becerra asked about parking and said we will be losing parking. She said many people don't want this project, but was told that the City Council wants it.

Jim Sayer, university property owner and member of citizen group. He has been working on getting towards this project for twenty years. He feels this will be transformational for the businesses downtown. The people on this working group and many members of community want this project. It is not just the council members. The community group has met with business delivery drivers to make it right for them.

Mr. Nugent said that he is supportive of this project but doesn't feel that an all-or-nothing approach is the best, and that we really can't change some of the big stuff. He supports this project even more because of the stretch from the bridge to Hellgate High School, which will improve traffic in this area. He did add that he is getting mixed reviews in emails from constituents. He is concerned about some of the businesses downtown, and he is worried that some of those places rely on people coming downtown. He hopes these businesses don't suffer. He does think the good outweighs his worries. He has no concern about using TIF money because he knows this is strong and the funds are there.

Ms. Sherrill thanked everyone who has worked so hard on this project. She says she often bikes, walks, and drives downtown. She has commuted in all ways and very often. The one-way streets are very dangerous, and she has witnessed that. The safety pieces really resonate with her. She does not feel this project is perfect and is disappointed that some elements have been removed. However, she does not think our downtown works very well. She is concerned about downtown businesses and hopes we can find a way to encourage people to start parking in the garages.

Mr. Melson works for DJ&A; he has been recusing himself from the projects with DJ&A. However, these two items are not tied to DJ&A, so he will be voting on them. He feels that a safer, more connected downtown is worth the work, and he will support this project.

Mr. Ponton said he has gone back and forth on this project. He will support this project because the positives outweigh the negatives. He appreciates the public feedback.

Ms. Savage said this project is not perfect and it would have been nice to have all the options, such as more bike lanes on Front and Main. She is very excited about the Hip Strip as she does not like to drive this area, let alone bike it. She has had close calls with her daughter crossing the street from high school.

Ms. Jordan also feels this project is not perfect but supports it because of the safety features that help people get into and out of downtown. She would also like to say that Ms. Petri has been working hard to address her concerns, and she hopes some of her concerns will be addressed.

Ms. Becerra also said she works for DJ&A but will also be voting today. She supports this project. She is concerned about businesses downtown, but those businesses have shown resiliency. Thank you to the staff, citizens, and businesses who have lent hours of time to the working groups, and thank you to the public for their comments.

Mr. Campbell is not supportive of this project, and he has stated these reasons in the past. He hears many of his colleagues say it is not a perfect project, and he finds it interesting that we are committing so much money to a project we are not really sure about. He said in all these discussions he has not heard his colleagues say what they don't like about it, and now they are saying this.

Moved by: Gwen Jones

Approve the resolution supporting advancement into final design and implementation of the Downtown Safety Access and Mobility (SAM) project, as established in attached Resolution.

AYES: (10): Mirtha Becerra, Betsy Craske, Gwen Jones, Kristen Jordan, Sean McCoy, Eric Melson, Mike Nugent, Justin Ponton, Jennifer Savage, and Amber Sherrill

NAYS: (1): Bob Campbell

ABSENT: (1): Stacie Anderson

Vote results:Approved (10 to 1)

3.2 Professional Services Amendment 1 with Jackson Contractor Group for the Downtown Safety Access & Mobily Project

This was discussed with the item above

Moved by: Gwen Jones

Approve and authorize the Mayor to sign the contract amendment to the Professional Services agreement with Jackson Contractor Group for tasks related to preconstruction services.

AYES: (10): Mirtha Becerra, Betsy Craske, Gwen Jones, Kristen Jordan, Sean McCoy, Eric Melson, Mike Nugent, Justin Ponton, Jennifer Savage, and Amber Sherrill

NAYS: (1): Bob Campbell

ABSENT: (1): Stacie Anderson

Vote results:Approved (10 to 1)

4. ADJOURNMENT